YOU, TOO, HAVE A CALLING
I Corinthians 12:4-13
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In much of life I find myself a layman. There may be a few renaissance men among us, those who can adjust a carburator, build a cabinet, sail a ship, manage a farm, write poetry, play the harpsichord, cook an omelette, but not many. For the most part we depend on a specialist. The technological revolution of the twentieth century has made specialization necessary. We depend on people who know a great deal about a particular thing. When we enter a hospital we are grateful for the fact that we will be in the hands of a highly trained specialist. When the furnace refuses to work we are relieved to turn the matter over to a person who knows all there is to know about heating systems.

Hand in hand with the technological revolution, we have seen in our lifetime the inaudible explosion in knowledge. In science, medicine, history - there is more to know than the individual can assimilate. Harvey Cox, theological gadfly, recalls his determination after graduation to keep abreast of his field. And he confesses that his solemn vow soon meant reading the reviews of the new books - and finally, simply reading the titles. It is, in all disciplines, the age of the specialist.

Sociologists are warning us that there are inherent dangers in the phenomenon. There are serious ethical problems raised by our dependence on computer technology, in our ability to construct a Neutron Bomb. Educators, for instance, must constantly confront the issue of whether their purpose is to train people to know their way around one particular technological field, or to gain the broader, more generalized view of what was once valued as a liberal education.

We are too eager to bestow a mystique on the specialist: we are easily intimidated, afraid even to ask questions of the surgeon, or insurance agent, or automobile mechanic for fear of revealing our own ignorance. The specialist mentality is very much a part of the way we live, and it spills over, almost naturally, into matters religious.

Now there is a curious dilemma here. We are the ones who invented the word layman, or laity. It comes from a Greek word laos, and it meant "the whole people of God". The meaning of the word, however, has changed almost entirely. Webster defines laity as "the mass of the people as distinguished from the specially skilled". The very word layman implies - uninitiated, amateur, ignorant. Ironically, the church uses the word as the culture understands it. The laity are the people - as distinct from the clergy, the specialists. Here too, the laity are the amateurs, the uninitiated, the ignorant. The specialists here are assumed to know the secrets of the subject: certain authority is granted to the specialist: a mystique exists, fed by an esoteric vocabulary, a certain style of dress and a general remoteness from the laity - the people.

But first, think with me for a moment as we put the whole matter in historical perspective. The issue of specialization initially emerged in the first century Christian Church in the city of Corinth. It's too bad that we don't know a little bit more about the Corinthian people: they appear to be delightful in a scandalous sort of way. They were strong prople. They reflected the cosmopolitan atmosphere of their seaport city: they were a potent blend of paganism, Greek philosophy and orthodox Judaism. They were vigorous, contentious and competitive. When they observed the Lord's Supper some of them were so enthusiastic that they gorged themselves on the food and got drunk on the wine. And when they began to order their

life as a Christian community they were continually comparing their respective tasks and arguing about their relative importance. They were playing a first century version of a contemporary game we know so well: "mine is better than yours".

St. Paul saw immediately the danger of the specialist mentality and addressed it in that portion of his letter to his Corinthian friends that we heard this morning. There are many gifts, he told them; many different skills and abilties. God needs them all. None is more important, more necessary, more holy than any of the others. In fact, the church is like a body - dependent on all of its parts performing the function they were best suited to perform. The task, the vocation, if you will, of the Christian according to Paul is to exploit and use to the fullest the special abilities and skills he or she has. To be oneself, that is to say: Joyfully and gratefully and energetically to use what I have been given - that is my vocation,

The point is that there is no ecclesiastical caste system: there are a variety of ways to be a Christian: no one way is more important, more pleasing to God, than another way. Unfortunately, much of that has been lost on the church. Very early in its life the Christian Church borrowed two time honored ideas from the world. The first was the hierarchial model for exercise of power and authority. Just as a kingdom needed a king, an empire an emporer,an army a general, so the church as an organization needed a leader, a head, a boss. Just as the world granted status, privilege and rank to its leaders, so the church rather quickly followed suit with its clergy. The second idea was borrowed from Greek philosophy; namely, that all reality can be divided into two categories - spirit and flesh, sacred and secular. The realm of religion was seen to be distinct, apart from the world.

When those two ideas combine - the hierarchical model of leadership and the dichotomy between religion and the rest of life, the result simply put, is two kinds of Christians - clergy and laity. One, granted the special status of leadership, is isolated from the world, undefiled by such worldly concerns as earning a living and raising a family: the other is emersed in the world but dependent now on the religious specialist to grant access to the Holy; through prayer - which it was assumed they could do best, through reading of sacred texts - which were kept in a language only they could read, and through sacred ritual which ordination permitted them alone to perform. The clergy had a vocation, which means a calling, given by God. The laity were less fortunate, but free to pursue life on the basis of other considerations.

Now that is a very long way from the content of First Corinthians 12 in particular and the New Testament theology in general. But it has been an altogether durable heresy. Twenty centuries later we are still operating with a slightly modified version of the same system. Clergy, it is assumed rather universally, should have been called by God to their profession. Doctors, teachers, mechanics come to theirs by an altogether different route. Clergy are specialists: the universal assumption is that they know about God, can pray better and longer and more effectively than the laity. And, somewhere inside all of us there lingers that old, old notion that to be a minister one must not be worldly. I still don't know whether to be flattered or insulted when someone says, "You don't look like a minister." In a delightfully satiric book, <u>How to Become a Bishop without Being Religious</u>, Charles Merrill Smith advises that a successful preacher will "gather up in himself a host of characteristics which advertise that here is a man of much prayer, disentangled from the secular, soiling concerns which obsess most men...

You may have a taste for shaggy sport coats, bright ties and the like. You must ruthlessly suppress it...Who would turn for spiritual counsel to a man in a tweed sport coat?...A prudent preacher will never use alcohol or tobacco (certain Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Lutherans are exempt), avoid card playing and dancing and the use of profanity. His pleasures will not be a vigorous nature. It is a pity that croquet is no longer popular for it is the ideal recreation for clergy. No one gets very excited about it, no one swears over a poor shot, it is inexpressive and it doesn't work up a sweat." (pp. 1-13).

Only in sophisticated literature do clergy come across as human beings. Graham Greene, Tennessee Williams, John Updike portray priests and ministers as fallible men, full of self-doubt and passion, sometimes tortured but altogether human beings. Television and Hollywood, on the other hand, relentlessly sustain the stereotype. I am probably unusually sensitive, but I have yet to encounter a clergy type on television or in a movie with whom I would want to spend much time. The real tragedy, however, is not in the popular stereotype of ministers, but in the resultant idea of the laity. The tragedy is that the entire Protestant experiment was born in an idea so revolutionary that it would have erased all the distinctions within the people of God. Listen to this significant paragraph from Presbyterian historian Leonard Trinterud. "The ministry, said Calvin, is a function of the whole church, distributed among the members according as God has given to each various gifts and capacities and corresponding calls. Calvin rejected the concept embodied in the terms 'clergy' and 'laity'. The ministry is not an order of men, religiously different from those who are supposedly merely laymen. The ministry is not even a group of men. The ministry is basically the church fulfilling its God-given task." (The Church and Its Changing Ministry, p.46).

At the time of the Reformation it was called the "Priesthood of all Believers". It was the revolutionary concept that the task of the clergy, while requiring full time effort, was essentially no more important and certainly no more holy, than any task performed by any other person. We have affirmed it this morning in the ordination of Elders and Deacons. I continue to believe that this idea, to which we pay occasional lip service, is one of the most dynamic ideas within the Christian faith, and that it has ramifications far beyond the life of the institutional church.

Consider, for instance, the broader implications. We assume that God calls people to the clergy; that to be a minister is a holy calling. But what if God is equally interested in politics, and homemaking and the law? What if God's call may be answered in a variety of ways depending on the particular skills and abilities He has already given the person? Elton Trueblood put it eloquently: "The exciting idea behind the New Testament use of 'calling' is that ours is God's world, in all its parts. The way in which we grow potatoes is as much a matter of God's will as is the way in which we pray or sing." (Ibid p.63). And an Englishman, Canon Edward Patey: "All orders are holy. Plumbers are as much in holy orders as the clergy. Electricians, park-keepers, doctors and typists are all working as much with the things of God as the priest with the sacrament." (God's Frozen People, p.12).

The radical message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that God really loves the world. The world is where His work is done. What that means personally is that God values what you do in the world. Regardless of how you earn your living, or how you spend your time, it is of interest to God. He calls you to do it for His glory. In fact, because you spend most of your time in the world and not in the church, your opportunity to be an effective disciple of Jesus Christ and therefore an important

part of the church, is far greater than the opportunity a clergyman has. In Hans Ruedi-Weber's words you "spend most of your working hours in social, political, economic and cultural areas where the decisive battles of faith are being fought." (opt.cit. p.12). That is to say, God's work may be talked about, planned and celebrated in this building. But it happens elsewhere - in the State House, and Courtroom and banks and schools.

Do you think for a moment that God cares more about what hymns His people are singing in Columbus, Ohio, than about how this community will resolve the matter of quality education for all its children? Do you think that God cares more about whether His Presbyterian people decide to ordain homosexuals than about the rights of all people to equal justice and equal opportunity? The simple fact is that you - where you are most of the time - will determine how the important issues of life are resolved. You, not the clergy, are involved in making this community livable: the vital decisions are made in your offices as you make the city go financially and legally and commercially, in your clinic or operating room or classroom. You are called in that context to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Your vocation is to be His special person in the world, wherever and however you earn your living and spend your time.

J. H. Oldham once asked, "Why should a scientist or engineer or an administrator attach any great importance to religion unless it says to him: -'In the work you are doing day by day you are a partner of God in His work of creation and the realization of His purpose for the (human family)'". (Ibid p.62).

The radical message of the New Testament is that you are, or can be, God's partner: that He has called you, however exalted or modest you are to an important work. He has called you to heal or to create or to build or to teach. He has called you to help someone else, to extend compassion and caring to someone who needs you. That is His work too. When a child is healed - when a difficult political decision is made honestly - when parent and teenager extend grace and forgiveness - God's call has been answered. I believe He calls each of us to become all that we are capable of becoming. I believe He makes us impatient with the status quo in our own lives. I believe He calls us to be as excellent as we can in whatever we do.

It has taken a number of years, but I have finally learned that God, in wondrous ways, has given every person a special gift: a unique something, a particular skill, or ability or sensitivity which no one else has. Some are blessed conspicuously. Some not so obviously. But every person, I believe, possesses a gift from God which is entirely unique. Some persons are exquisitely skilled - intellectually, artistically, mechanically: some are exquisitely skilled relationally: some can love openly and heal emotionally.

What I want to suggest is that God's call to you is not necessarily a mystical voice telling you what to do. Rather His call comes in the form of that special gift He has given to you. Your vocation, your call, is to know what it is, to nurture it, to sharpen it, and to use it fully. Our faith is that in Jesus Christ God has shown how deeply He cares about the world. In Christ He has torn down the barriers we construct between sacred and secular. The world is Holy - made Holy by God's law. We are called, you and I, in Jesus Christ, to use what God has given us. May I suggest that there is nothing more joyful and exciting and satisfying than to know what God has given - and then, to put it to work in the world He loves? That is our vocation.

Amen.

Our Father, we are grateful for the many gifts You have given: for the unique and particular gifts You have given to each of us. Grant us the courage to use what we have: to live our lives fully: to serve you faithfully through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.